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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000610

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SUBJECT: RELATIVE CALM IN BAGHDAD; JAFARI MEETS WITH SISTANI

REF: BAGHDAD 594

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)
AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Incidents of sectarian violence dropped further February 26. There were reports of mortar fire on a mosque in Sadr City and of an IED outside a mosque in Basra. Jafari's Chief of Staff reported that the PM had traveled to Najaf where Grand Ayatollah Sistani "approved" of the process leading to the Shia Islamist Coalition (List 555) PM nomination decision. Sistani also reportedly stressed that the Shia Coalition must remain united. In a meeting with the Political Counselor, IIP leader Tariq al-Hashimi called for the abolition of all militia groups and the cleaning up of the Iraqi police. President Talabani's Chief of Staff told PolOff that many Kurds are losing patience with the slow pace of government formation negotiations and want Kurdish leaders Talabani and Barzani to focus on internal Kurdistan issues rather than national Iraqi politics. END SUMMARY

12. (C) MNF-I noted two reports of Mosques attacked on February 26. According to Al-Furat television, mortars were fired at the Al Ansar mosque in Sadr City with no casualties. According to REO Basrah, an IED was detonated outside the Al Amir Mosque, located in the center of the city. REO reported that the only reported injuries were of construction workers and (according to a REO media contact) possibly individuals responsible for the explosion. There also was a bomb in al-Hillah, but it drew little street reaction. Separately, more than 56 Shia families have left their homes in the Abu Ghraib district after receiving threats from Sunni extremists, according to al-Alem TV. Shaykh Jalal ad-Din as-Saghir told PolCouns late February 25 that Sunni Arab militants had forced some Shia families out of their homes in Tarmiya. (Comment: We cannot verify reports of displacements so far. End Comment.)

JAFARI TRIP TO NAJAF

13. (C) During a February 26 late afternoon telephone call, PM Chief of Staff Abdul Aziz al-Tamimi told PolOff that Jafari had traveled to Najaf earlier in the day to visit Ayatollah Sistani. Al-Temimi said that the purpose of Jafari's two-hour visit was to inform Sistani of the joint steps to reduce sectarian tensions. (Comment: This visit comes after Sistani twice gave stinging rebukes to the Iraqi government for security lapses. End Comment.) According to al-Tamimi, Jafari also discussed the government formation progress and gave an update on the status of the Shia

Coalition. Tamimi, who did not travel to Najaf, claimed that Jafari had told him that Sistani approved of the democratic process whereby the Shia Coalition had selected him as its PM candidate. Al-Temimi said that Sistani made clear to Jafari that the Shia Coalition must remain intact.

SUNNI ARAB PARTY SAYS IT'S BETTER

¶4. (C) PolCouns February 26 informed Tariq al-Hashimi of the Iraqi Islamic Party that MNF-I forces will increase patrols in Baghdad to quell possible violence in the coming days. Hashimi welcomed the move and said he perceived that violence was diminishing. He had only one report to share on February 26 involving a mosque in the al-Dora district. (Comment: MNF-I gave a different report from al-Hashimi which indicated no actual gunfire; again we found the IIP's information suspicious. End Comment.) Hashimi and Emboffs reviewed Baghdad maps as al-Hashimi and IIP spokesman Zafir al-Ani pointed out the districts they thought were most threatened with violence. (They opined that the most suffering Baghdad neighborhoods are ash-Shu'ala in northwest Baghdad -- the most difficult -- along with nearby Huriya and Ghazaliya.) They pleaded for increased American patrols in these areas and removal of ING from them.

¶5. (C) Hashimi explained he must respond to Sunni Arab pleas for action in the wake of last week's violence following the Samarra mosque bombing. PolCouns

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replied the Islamic Party must counsel restraint. Ultimately, he noted, the best action would be for Hashimi and other elected officials to participate in the new Iraqi government.

URGING IIP TO STAY IN THE GAME

¶6. (C) Hashimi told PolCouns that he might rejoin talks on the government but he had a list of demands that Jafari had to move on. (He observed that Jafari had promised to call him February 26 but so far had not done so.) PolCouns urged al-Hashimi to rejoin talks promptly. When al-Hashimi complained that he lacked cards, PolCouns shot back that if the Sunni Arabs boycott the talks they should not be sure the Shia and Kurds would not cut a deal without them.

¶7. (C) Hashimi called for a thorough restructuring of the Iraqi Police. He said many IP officers are past criminals. PolCouns countered that this is exactly why Hashimi needs to help negotiate who the next security ministers would be as well as the contents the government program. Hashimi said that the Iraqi government must quickly disband militia. He agreed with Pol Couns that this would occur only when the militias evolve an affiliation with the Iraqi Police.

Kurds Gathering Inwards?

¶8. (C) On February 26, Presidency Council Chief of Staff Kamran Karadaghi told Pol and Legal Offs that the Kurdish public was losing patience with the slow pace of government formation negotiations. He reported that both Kurdistan Democratic Party leader Masoud Barzani and President Jalal Talabani were under

pressure from their constituencies to return permanently to Kurdistan and take care of matters at home, namely the long-awaited merger of the two Kurdistan Regional Governments (KRGs). Karadaghi explained that the Kurdish people, having observed the political and social upheaval in the rest of Iraq, are more determined than ever to withdraw into their cocoon in the North. PolOff argued that that attitude came too close to independence, and that both Talabani and Barzani needed to explain to their people how to be "Iraqis," vice "Kurds." Karadaghi agreed, but noted that it would be difficult to get Kurds to take a broader perspective on Iraq.

KHALILZAD